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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 002922

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SUBJECT: TURKEY: POLITICAL HOT-BUTTON APPOINTMENT TESTS NEW
PRESIDENT

Classified By: Political Counselor Janice G. Weiner, for Reasons 1.4 (b
,d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY AND COMMENT. President Gul will shortly appoint a new chairman of the Higher Education Council (YOK), a body enshrined in the 1982 Constitution to oversee Turkey's university system and preserve its staunchly secularist nature. In a country perpetually challenged by perceived threats to the national ideology, YOK has been an outspoken critic of the governing Justice and Development Party's (AKP) alleged Islamic agenda. The YOK chairman is the one appointment the President makes on his own. Gul, already accused of being AKP's notary public, will undoubtedly have to defend his choice to head up an institution that has behaved as the attack dog of the Kemalist establishment. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

¶2. (C) The four-year term of the current YOK chairman, Erdogan Tezic, expires December 8. The former professor of constitutional law has run YOK as the Republic's Kemalist ueber-conscience. He blurred the roles of YOK, which has a

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narrow constitutional mandate to coordinate and improve university conditions, and the separate Rectors' Council, also headed by the YOK chairman. As the higher education system's overseer, he maintained that YOK's charter tasked him with "enlightening society," which he did on topics ranging from the dangers of the headscarf to parliamentary procedure to terrorism -- all with a rigidly ideological underpinning and occasional thinly veiled threats. Dismayed by AKP's hasty constitutional amendment package last May, Tezic claimed "the political majority in the parliament" was trying to "take over not only the political power but the state power as well... I do not want to use the word 'coup,' but a 'regime crisis' might emerge." Edibe Sozen, communications professor and AKP's Vice Chairman for Media and Communications, characterized his tenure as a "dark age for universities." That said, Tezic has been the relatively benign successor to Kemal Guruz, who used his two terms to bring unprecedented vigor to the role of the Kemalist vanguard.

¶3. (C) YOK is comprised of 21 members; 7 are appointed by the President of the Republic, 7 by the cabinet, and 7 by the inter-university council. The YOK chairman is the one appointment the President makes on his own. Given the last

two chairs' roles as self-appointed guardians of the Republic, Kemalist eyes will be riveted on Gul. If President Gul chooses to elevate a sitting member, the appointment will likely come from the group named by the cabinet (of which Gul himself was a member until the 2007 elections).

¶4. (C) The YOK chairmanship is the final major appointment of 2007, which has seen a new parliament, a new president, a new Constitutional Court president, and a new president of the Supreme Court of Appeals. Riza Ayhan, Ankara University professor and an advisor to opposition Nationalist Action Party (MHP) leader Devlet Bahçeli, observed that these are not just important for short-term developments, but for Turkey's entire direction. Gul may choose to drag out the process to let some of the heat subside -- a tactic not likely to bring much relief. Muharrem Ince, Republican People's Party (CHP) member of the Education Committee, could not think of a single possible Gul appointee who would be acceptable to secularist Turks.

¶5. (C) YOK is a product of a military coup, reminded Necat Birinci (AKP), Vice Chairman of parliament's Education Committee. Constitutional expert Ergun Özbudun, who spearheaded AKP's constitutional reform effort, noted that YOK was one of three state-controlled checks the military enshrined in the 1982 constitution as a bulwark against an untrustworthy political class. The Constitution, however, assigns YOK a coordinating and administrative role. Mehmet Sağlam (AKP), Education Committee Chairman and former YOK chairman, observed that from its centralized origins in 1981, when Turkey had 19 universities, the steady process of university decentralization reversed abruptly in 1995 with Guruz's appointment; Guruz began to use the position to exert his moral authority through political public statements. Many have been disappointed that Tezic, President Sezer's

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appointee who was expected to have a democratizing influence on the organization, has also focused more on polemics than pedagogy. Others of the Kemalist bent have been grateful for YOK's evolution into virtually the last remaining institution defending the Republic; CHP's Ince describes it as "incredibly important now," particularly in keeping the headscarf out of universities.

¶6. (C) YOK, with only 9 full-time members, now oversees about 100 universities. Higher education's greatest need right now, all agree, is faculty -- Tezic blames the government for failing to appoint new teachers; Sağlam claims that YOK itself, under Guruz, killed the biggest teacher-development program, which used to send 1000 graduate students "to western countries" for a degree before requiring them to return to teach. (The Ministry of Education is reportedly attempting to revive the program).

¶7. (C) Gul's appointee will undertake a heavy substantive burden and, like Gul himself, may need to demonstrate his independence from AKP. YOK's new chairman will play a central role in determining who teaches Turkey's next generation and the knowledge and values they instill. The new chairman will be hard-pressed, however, to be evaluated on his own merits. Any democratizing steps -- let alone any flexibility on the issue of headscarves in universities or religious education -- will be pointed to as further evidence of AKP's advancing Islamic agenda.

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